Women in the Military
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From the storm lashed decks of the Mayflower to the present hour, women have stood like a rock for the welfare and glory of the history of our country...and one might well add: unwritten, unrewarded, and unrecognized.


Throughout our nation’s history, women have played an important role in the military. It has not been until recently however, that women have been able to fully contribute to the military and be recognized for their past achievements in this area. With this new recognition and admittance, many debates and problems have arisen. One of the most common debates surrounds the idea of women in combat positions. Others include the issue of pregnancy, housing, and the physical requirements in order to serve. One problem that has arisen is that of the sexual harassment and rape of some women soldiers.

Today, there is much heated debate about women in the military with valid issues on both sides. Unfortunately, it is rare to hear both sides of the story. Because of this, many people form their judgments without knowing the full implications of those judgments. I have to admit that I was one of those people. I like to think of myself as an equal opportunities advocate. When I chose this topic to write my paper on, I originally planned on writing in support of full female participation in the military including combat positions. After I began the research on my project, however, and started to read and talk to enlisted members of the armed forces, my opinions slowly began to change. I realized that although in theory women in the armed forces seemed like a good idea, there are many obstacles that make that reality very difficult to achieve. In writing this paper I am not proposing that either position is more valid or right than the other. I only hope to present each side in an equal light to help others to understand the issues involved. Am not proposing that either position is more valid or right than the other. I only hope to present each side in an equal light to help others to understand the issues involved.

History of Women in the Military

General Jeanne Holm was one of the very first women in the Air Force to achieve the rank of General. Although in retirement now, she still is an important military figure. Her book, Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution, gives an impressive account of the roles that women have thus far played in the military. It was my primary source when researching the history surrounding women in the military. Due to the fact that Holm’s book is so detailed and in depth, I also used a book by Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider entitled Sound Off: American Military Women Speak Out. This book provides a timeline detailing the major points of women’s military history, so when writing, I tried to follow that guideline.

According to Holm,

Women in point of fact, have been serving their country since it began - Molly Pitcher fired her cannon in 1778 without congressional sanction. In the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, women fought disguised as men. In World War One, their medical services were indispensable.
services were indispensable. During the crises of World War Two, when women were necessary to fill the breach in personnel shortages, they acquitted themselves with distinction. (Holm, front cover)

Through every major conflict that the United States has been involved in, women have played important roles. The idea that women who served in the military should be offered the same protection as men did not arise until World War II. In 1941, Congresswoman Edith Rodgers introduced a bill to Congress proposing the establishment of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). Rodgers had in mind those women who had served in World War I and had failed to be compensated for it (Holm 21-22). Although the Army was the first branch that proposed the idea, the other branches soon followed suit with similar bills to Congress.

The WAAC bill finally passed in 1942. This was the first major breakthrough for women in the armed forces, but it was deemed a failure due to the drawbacks that were included. When WAAC was established it did not offer women much. According to Holm, “[m]ilitary women were not entitled to the same pay as their male counterparts, to entitlements for dependents, or to military rank” (24). Due to these shortcomings and many other contributing forces, WAAC soon went under. In 1943, another bill was passed to establish the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). In the WAC, many of the earlier drawbacks of WAAC were resolved (Holm 25).

After the war ended, The Women’s Armed Service Integration Act was passed. Finally there was a permanent place for women established in the military. This particular Act allowed a place in each of the branches for women not only in war time, but in peace time as well. It also provided a quick and convenient way to mobilize women when needed (Holm 113). Many mark the Women’s Armed Service Integration Act as the first major step towards the allowance of women in the military.

After the Integration Act was established, frenzy over the debate calmed down. The war had ended and people were returning to the lives that they once knew before the war began. With the return to traditional peacetime roles after World War II, women again were pushed into the background. Interest in the issues of women in the military did not rise again until the late sixties and seventies. In her writing, Holm states that “except for the uniforms and marching, the indoctrination programs more closely resembled ladies’ finishing schools than military programs” (Holm 181). She also states that “all basic training programs were heavily sprinkled with courses to enhance feminine appearance and bearing” (Holm 181). Throughout World War II women had seemed to overcome stipulations such as these, however in the ensuing years women were again pushed into their traditional stereotyped positions, many military women serving as secretaries to higher ranking male officials. In fact, the chapter Holm dedicates to this is called “The Sixties: Typewriter Soldiers.”

Eventually as the current wave of feminism swept the nation, the Vietnam War and the Equal Rights Amendment, the role of women in the military was once again altered. During the next two decades, battles were being won in leaps and bounds. In 1967, Congress passed a bill that offered more career opportunities for military women. This bill also allowed for equal eligibility for retirement benefits between the genders (Schneider 253). At the time of the acceptance of the All Volunteer Force in 1973, Lt. Sharron Frontiero was winning not only a battle for herself, but for all women in the military. Based on a suit she filed in 1970, the Supreme Court ruled that the same family benefits that extend to men should be granted to women (Holm 290-91, Schneider 253).

Nineteen seventy-five was a key year for women in the military. Many existing policies were changed. The Department of Defense eliminated the practice of discharging women on the basis of pregnancy, due to the influence of the idea of equal opportunity. Another factor included the permission of a leave of absence for men in the event of the birth of a child (Holm 301-2, Schneider 253). Also in that year, President Ford signed into action a bill requiring the Department of Defense to allow women into its service academies. This included the prestigious institutes of West Point, Colorado Springs, and Annapolis.
Weapons training for women also became a requirement by the services (Schneider 254). In 1978, one of the largest steps towards women in the military took place. The Army, Navy, and Air Force finally integrated women into their ranks by abolishing the WAC, WAVES, and WAF (Schneider 254). This action toppled over the barrier that previously led people to believe that although women could serve in the military they had to do so separately, and not alongside men.

With the dawn of the eighties, women were fully integrated into the military. In 1980, the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act was passed. This allowed for women to be integrated onto previously all male promotion lists (Schneider 254). Now with so many battles won, the eighties became a time to take advantage of these new found rights and put them into full effect. Undersecretary of the Air Force Antonia Chayes summed it up by saying:

If I were to sum up the 1980’s for military women it would be: making a states of relative stability and normalcy when all the “firsts” and the pioneering will be behind them; when acceptance and equity of opportunity will be the norm. The challenge now is to chart the course to make it happen. (Holm 381)

This is perhaps where we are today, charting courses to making acceptance and equal opportunity the norm.

The issue of women in the military sparked a hot debate in the eighties. Many questions arose, turning the debate into a gender war. Pregnancy was one such barrier, which has kept women at home for centuries. Lt. Gen. Yerks of the Army was concerned with the idea of military women getting pregnant and the amount of time lost in maternity leave. One senator, William Proxmire, did not buy into the idea. He stated that “Well he (Yerks) should take a good look at the amount of time lost by the average woman in uniform to that of the average man” (Holm 384). Senator Proxmire is referring to how the GAO had found that men lose more time for drug and alcohol abuse than women do for drug and alcohol abuse and pregnancy combined (Holm 384). This debate may explain why in 1985 the armed services began to deny women the option of resigning in the event of pregnancy if they had a service obligation or were needed (Schneider 254).

Why Women Join the Military

Although a place has been firmly established in today’s military for women, the question still arises as to why women wish to be a part of the military. What exactly is the attraction? Many stereotypes accompany a woman as a member of the military. One such woman summed up the stereotypes by stating “There’s a lot of misconceptions on the outside about women in the military. It’s either that the females go out with every single male on the base, or they’re gay” (Schneider 3). So yet again with all the controversy, debates, difficulties and stereotypes, why join? This is one question that the authors of Sound Off were interested in. They posed this question to many enlisted women. When these women were asked, their answers did not differ that greatly from those that one would expect to hear from men. Many people believe that women enter the military to fight a battle for feminism, and although this may be true in some cases, there are many other reasons as well. In fact, the Schneiders note that “Most military women do not see themselves as pioneers” (5). When asked why they did join, the replies women gave were as diverse as the women themselves. Some joined out of a sense of patriotism, others needed money for school and saw the military as a way to fund it. Just like men, some women entered because they were unsure of what to do with their lives, or to grow up away from the boundaries of their family (Schneider 7). Many joined to see the world and others for a steady job, pay, and future job training (Schneider 12). A quotation in the very first chapter sums it up pretty well: “That’s the first question: What’s an attractive woman like you doing in the Army? I say, “Sir, probably for the same reasons you are” (Schneider 2). Today women make up 12% of the armed forces (Burrelli). Due to all these opportunities and benefits offered to those in the service, joining the military is becoming more and more attractive to

34
men and women alike.

**Occupations that Women Fill in the Military**

Once Congress decided that more occupations should be opened to women in the military, it was up to each individual branch to see that women were integrated into these positions. With the opening of these positions, many questions arose as to how it would affect the status of the military as it was. Margaret C. Harrell and Laura L. Miller were interested in how these new opportunities affected morale, readiness and cohesion especially. Their book, *New Opportunities for Military Women: Effects Upon Readiness, Cohesion and Morale*, not only gives valid data on these issues, but also examines exactly how many positions have opened up to women, and how many women occupy these new positions.

In order to do their research, Miller and Harrell selected military units they believed would provide a broad view of the issues. From these units, they chose focus groups in order to find out the opinions of people on the effects of recent changes. The topics focused on gender issues, therefore the groups were divided by gender and rank to encourage free responses. Harrell and Miller also used surveys on a larger number of people to ensure that the focus groups represented the whole. To find out more about the new opportunities offered to military women, the researchers interviewed experts from each branch of the military. Their questions revolved around the extent and effects of the integration of women.

In looking at the data presented by Harrell and Miller, one can see when examining the integration of women into the military that the process is slow, but it is moving along. Gradually, more and more women are moving into occupations previously not allowed to them. Before 1993, approximately 61% of the occupations in the Army, 61% in the Navy, 97% in the Air Force, and 33% in the Marines were open to women. Due to policy changes there was an increase in every branch. In the Army, the percentage rose to 67.2%, in the Navy, 91.2%, in the Air Force, 99.4%, and 62% in the Marines. In total, across all branches of the armed services, the percentage of occupations open to women rose from 67% to 80.2% (Harrell and Miller 12: Table 2.1). According to Harrell and Miller, the reason for the vastly differing numbers is in part due to the interpretation of the new policies within the separate branches of the armed forces. As for the number of women that occupy these new positions, the numbers are still low. In the Army, only 5.7% of the personnel in the newly opened positions were women and in the Navy it was only 2%. It was only 3% and only 1.7% in the Air Force and Marines respectively (Harrell and Miller 12: Table 2.2).

Those occupations that are still closed to women are all combat related jobs. This is one very hot topic today. On one hand, there is the commonly held belief that women are not capable of combat positions. Physically, a woman cannot compare to the man standing next to her, and mentally, killing a person as required too often in combat, may offend her “delicate sensibilities.” There is also the question of the distraction men and women would pose for each other if they were to fight side by side. When looking at it from the other side, there is the belief that if women are willing to lay their lives on the line for their country, why should they not be allowed to? There is also the belief that if our country wishes to achieve full equality between the sexes, all positions, including combat positions, should be open to women.

Both sides of the debate raise valid points. When examining the issue from the point of view of those who oppose women in the military, I believe the question is not dealing with whether or not a woman soldier is capable of fighting, but whether or not she would be endangering the lives of others if she were to do so. Canada experimented with the idea of women in combat and the results found after the conclusion of their experiment are used in the argument opposing women in combat positions. Those who argue this point say:

... the Canadian experience in which women were recruited for the 16 week infantry training course...was identical to the men’s course. Forty-five of the 48 women recruited failed to complete the course. (Burrell)

According to this experiment, most women cannot
live up to the expectations of a combat position. If we change those standards, would we be compromising our overall combat capabilities?

The traditional gender roles that govern our nation have been in existence since the beginning of the common era. It is difficult to erase such ingrained beliefs. When speaking with one young man who is now discharged from the Army, he made an off hand comment concerning the women in his platoon. He said that the male members of his platoon were sometimes overly protective of the female members. After hearing this I had to wonder how this may affect a combat situation. If a female were in some extreme danger in which the outcome would result in death, and her death were unavoidable, would the men feel compelled by their “protective instincts” to endanger their lives and possibly the success of their mission to valiantly try and save her? This question, of course, is a rhetorical question whose answers would depend on the individuals involved. In considering national security however, it warrants some consideration.

What about the other side of the issue? In much of the reading I have encountered, many service members are for the idea of women in combat although with a few stipulations. According to a story in the Washington Post in 1997, 934 service members were asked what contributing forces influenced job performance. Of those 934, only two listed gender as a factor. According to the same article:

more than half the enlisted men
and one-third of the male officers
favored allowing women into all
combat positions from which they
are now excluded. About 80% of
the women supported the change,
with many believing women
should enter combat jobs only on
a volunteer basis. (Priet)
The Seattle Times found similar results, stating that:

Army surveys show that women
soldiers believe combat
experience will help their careers,
but they want women to be
assigned to combat positions only
if they volunteer. And the

majority of women soldiers aren’t personally interested. (Walters)

Although these articles provide insight into the ideas of military men and women, when one considers the idea of combat positions based on volunteerism, another problem arises. If we are involved in a quest for equality, should not the same courtesy extend to men? It is obvious that a compromise may be a long time in coming, not only due to the arguments that each side has, but also because women, soldiers and civilians alike are divided on the issues and cannot come to a common consensus.

Sexual Harassment and Rape

One current problem that is constantly receiving media attention is the seemingly ever present sexual harassment and rape of women in the military. Women Soldiers is a book of collected essays centering around women in the military. One essay, written by Patricia Hanna, looks at the stresses in careers of US servicewomen. According to Hanna, “It is impossible to know whether sexual harassment is more prevalent in the military than the civilian world, although it is apparent that it continues to be a considerable stressor for servicewomen” (68). In doing their research, Harrell and Miller found that when surveyed, 4% of men and 6% of the women answered “Yes, Frequently” to the question “Are the women in your unit (are you) being sexually harassed?” Fifteen percent of the men and 11% of the women answered “Yes sometimes.” Twenty-nine percent of the men answered “Yes but rarely,” as compared to 17% of the women. The majority, 53% of men and 66% of the women, answered “no” however.

Harrell and Miller also found that some women felt that they could not report sexual harassment. One reason was because they felt that such reports could argue that women do not belong in the military. Other reasons included their belief that either nothing would happen or they would be subject to revenge. They also stated that they did not want to destroy the career of an officer, or be known as the woman who destroyed a career (Harrell and Miller 75).

The most well known case involving sexual harassment is the Tailhook scandal. Tailhook is a
military convention that has been taking place for
years. Although it was a well known fact within
the military that the attendees could get out of
hand in their “partying,” the extent was not
Coughlin reported being sexual assaulted at
Tailhook in an event known as “The Gauntlet.”
The Gauntlet was a loosely formed group of up to
two hundred men who lined the corridor outside
the hospitality suites around 10:30 each night of
the convention and “touched” women who passed
down the corridor. It is estimated that during this
three day event 83 women were sexually
assaulted. Although it was a well known fact prior
to the convention that occurrences such as this
would be likely, no steps were taken to prevent
such behavior. Eventually the Pentagon
investigated the events that took place at Tailhook
in 1991. One hundred and forty officers from the
Marine Corps and Navy were referred for
disciplinary action. None of these cases ever went
to trial due to lack of evidence. Most were
punished non-judicially within the military.
Eventually the careers of fourteen admirals and
almost 300 aviators suffered because of Tailhook.
Both the Secretary of the Navy H. Lawrence
Garrett III and CNO Admiral Frank Kelso, who
were present at Tailhook, resigned as a result of
the scandal (Frontline).

The Tailhook scandals is at the extreme end of
the spectrum. Going back to what Hanna said, it
is not known if rape and sexual harassment are
more common in the military than in the civilian
world. It is unfortunate, but because not all cases
are reported it is difficult to find a solution. Some
people wish to resegregate the military. Others
feel that a move in this direction will only punish
the women, who are not the guilty parties. I found
a comment made by J.B. Dixson regarding
resegregation interesting; “If you’re concerned
about sparks...get rid of the matches, not the
gunpowder.”

As our country struggles to overcome the
sexist barriers it has constructed for itself, the
debate concerning women in the military will
continue to rage on. A compromise will not be
soon in coming due to the many contributing
factors, some of which I mentioned. If I were to
propose a compromise, it would be this: Structure
the military around those people that are most
capable. This does not necessarily mean men. Set
universal physical standards and if a woman can
accomplish these then she should be able to
occupy any position that a man who has met the
same standards is allowed to occupy. As for
pregnancy, I would suggest offering birth control
and a leave of absence in such an event, which are
both things the military has already thought of.

The bottom line is, centuries of patriarchy and
structured gender roles are not going to be erased
in a short period of time. Our best bet as a society
is to strive for equality by any means possible. If
equality does not seem to be a possibility in some
situations, propose a compromise. After all, one
must first learn to crawl before one can learn to
walk.

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